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# Social Aspects of Administering Technical Aid Programmes

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## SOCIAL ASPECTS OF ADMINISTERING TECHNICAL AID PROGRAMMES

*H. M. Mathur*

TECHNICAL assistance is not a totally new idea. There is enough evidence to suggest that, as a social process, the diffusion of knowledge and skills within and between nations has gone on at all the times. But in its present shape and size, technical assistance is distinctively a post-World War II phenomenon. What surely is new is the confidence that transfer of scientific and technical knowledge across national boundaries can bring quickly tangible economic benefits to the world's poor who outnumber the prosperous by two to one. The United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, held at Geneva in 1962 to make an assessment of the capacity of the existing knowledge to accelerate progress in the developing countries, represents one of the most fascinating developments of the kind in contemporary international affairs.

The process of internationally sharing scientific and technical skills spans practically all the spheres of human activity. Agriculture, because of its overwhelming importance in the developing nations, has been a major focus of most aid programmes. But efforts at improvement through the application of scientific and technical knowledge have equally keenly been directed towards such diverse areas as: fisheries, health, engineering, community development, industry, education, public administration, etc.

The fact that the developing countries can borrow technology without having to experience the difficulties that the industrialized nations faced in perfecting it is a highly important one. This should facilitate their development faster and systematically along pre-determined course. But development perhaps is not a matter of technology alone. The developing countries cannot, as one observer put it, "simply import the industrial revolution from abroad, uncrate it like a piece of machinery, and set it motion".<sup>1</sup> A lot more is involved in technical

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Edward S. Mason, *The Planning of Development in "Technology and Economic Development"*, A 'Scientific American' Books, Penguin Books (1965). September 1963 issue of Scientific American.

assistance than mere cross-national transfer of technology and know-how.

If the long distance transportation of technological innovations were all that needed to be arranged, the administration of technical assistance would indeed be a simple enough job. But in by its very nature technical aid meant to benefit peoples in the developing countries must be given through human beings—administrators, engineers, doctors, technicians and other specialists. It is the human factor and not the technological one that is more important here. In fact, the technical assistance in operation is often bedevilled by problems of a sort that have nothing to do with anything technological.

In most of the developmental aid programmes, technological factors alone are rated as of the highest significance. The relevance of the human factor is rarely given sufficient consideration. Much more, therefore, is known today about the technological side of development than its social, cultural and psychological facets. The medical expert, for instance, feels perfectly at home in planning a campaign to stamp out small-pox. But he finds himself quite helpless when the people in many traditional societies hide their children from him rather than get them willingly vaccinated. Specialists in other fields too have often found themselves in similar situations of people resisting programmes specifically directed at their own welfare.

Such problems, peculiar to development work in the developing countries, arise chiefly from the fact that the expert and the people, whom he is supposed to assist represent two divergent cultural systems. The replacement of 'foreign' expert by the 'national' expert perhaps would not automatically lead to resolution of all the difficulties. The position of a foreign expert is not substantially different from that of a national expert. Both are heir to the same educational and scientific tradition, and both seek to promote new ideas of doing things. The gulf separating them may be full-cultural or sub-cultural, but the fact of their being culturally distinguishable remains. In certain matters, there is more in common between an Australian agricultural expert and his Indonesian counterpart than, say, between these two and the people living in Indonesia's rural communities.

The role of these experts in administering technical aid programmes has, for some time past, been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion, and lately there has emerged a great deal of literature in the form of some books and many articles in journals, particularly, of behavioural and social sciences. This has also inspired some of the

novelists, and the popular novel *The Ugly American* in fact deals precisely with this theme. One conclusion all these studies have unanimously come to is that innovations that are attempted to be grafted on to the alien cultures with no regard for local values are unlikely to gain acceptance. Mere good intentions are not enough, as is so aptly remarked by Hugh Tinker, "Good will divorced from realistic understanding can be a boomerang".<sup>2</sup>

Resistance to scientific and technological change is generally found amongst peoples of all the developing countries. Anyone with some experience of work in these places would readily testify to the fact that urge for novelty is not universal. A close look at the traditional society should unveil the reasons for this conservatism. These societies actually are closely-knit, with their own settled ways of life. Any alteration in the existing pattern of relationships that the innovation inevitably involves is likely to be resisted vehemently for this reason. Hierarchical social order may be altered, religious sentiments outraged and customary practices ignored if the forces of change are allowed to gain an upper hand.

Strongest opposition to change comes from those whose vested interests or prestige may be jeopardized by the subsequent course of events. The coming in of the modern medical aid is viewed by the tribal 'shaman' (local 'curer'—leech or physician or doctor) as a direct threat to his profession, as also the social esteem in which he has been held traditionally. Apart from this, there are risks in accepting certain innovations which people sometimes are reluctant to take. In case anything goes wrong with the new seed, the subsistence farmer does not simply lose on the experiment; he is financially ruined.

Some obstacles to acceptance of innovation lie in the fact that those responsible for administration of technical aid programmes, particularly at the field level, do not always fully understand nuances of the society in which they work. Their inability to forge effective communication links with the local people is a constant source of grave misunderstandings. All too often, difficulties of this kind, stemming from differences in cultural background, frustrate the outcome of technical aid programmes.

Somehow, it is not adequately realized that the factors affecting the success or failure of the technical aid operations are essentially social. New technology does not work all by itself. It is the human

<sup>2</sup>Hugh Tinker, "The Human Factor in Foreign Aid", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (September, 1959).

beings who put it to use for their benefit. Until people are both willing and able to adjust themselves to behavioural changes that the innovation necessarily entails, there is little chance of promotional efforts making any significant impact. Satisfactory adjustment implies a mental state in which one gets accustomed to doing things in the new way without losing the sense of satisfaction provided only by the old manner of life. Adjustment to technical change is obviously a slow and difficult process.

Any attempt to transplant the innovation in the traditional society immediately triggers off a process of culture change. Culture is not a mere accumulation of elements—diverse, unrelated and accidental. Rather it is an integrated whole expressing a certain way of life that is common to all the members of the society which produced that culture. In traditional cultures, where social relationships are firmly fixed and approved forms of behaviour well established, each innovation tends to provoke a chain reaction of additional changes. New technological processes and equipment, to become acceptable, require corresponding changes in social practices and institutions to be effected simultaneously.

While traditional cultures undoubtedly are resistant to innovations, it would not be correct to assume that they are 'changeless' altogether. No culture is known to have firmly set its face against all change for all time. Both continuity and change are essential elements of human culture. It is, however, true that changes that the traditional society hosts usually are of a kind that cause least disturbance to the existing cultural fabric. Also, the changes there occur relatively slowly. Two many rapid changes are likely to arouse some suspicion.

How should, then, an aid expert go about getting the people in his charge interested in trying new ideas, planting a new crop, using new tools and new techniques? Can something be done to adapt the traditional social structure to the demands of the technological change in such a way that people whose ways of life are being transformed feel no loss of their cherished values? These are the kind of questions that now loom large on the research agenda of contemporary social science.

Amongst a pretty large variety of peoples in Asia, Africa, Oceania and South America, the anthropologists have long been working and living cheek by jowl. With years of their experience they feel they have built up the kind of expertise that administrators of aid programmes should seek to guide their efforts. The knowledge of the existing societies and cultures that the anthropologists possess surely is of very

considerable importance. The pattern of traditional life is one factor in the culture change equation. Failure to grasp the true significance of this factor cannot be expected to promote full understanding of the equation.

It is perhaps in recognition of the value of social science research on problems of culture change that UNESCO in the fairly early stages of the growth of technical assistance set up a committee of experts to recommend principles that aid administrators should follow in inducing change. The conclusions of this committee headed by the distinguished anthropologist Margaret Mead have greatly influenced technical assistance efforts ever since.<sup>3</sup> In 1955, UNESCO also sponsored the production of a manual for the benefit of the technical assistance experts. Again, it was Margaret Mead who edited this well-known book.<sup>4</sup>

The administrative problems connected with the rendering of technical assistance have, in recent years, been given further consideration by an international research institution whose activities are chiefly concerned with understanding the process of social development. A survey conducted a few years ago by this United Nations Research Institute for Social Development sought the views of 445 experts (including 119 'national' experts) engaged in technical assistance work in 13 developing countries chosen to provide a wide range of conditions. They were specifically asked to extract from their years of experience in technical assistance administration certain broad principles that they thought helped in successfully executing the aid projects. By this research on experts, much useful knowledge on the change process has accumulated. The findings of this survey have also been brought out in a book form.<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of their studies and also direct involvement in technical assistance programmes, many anthropologists and other social scientists have suggested guidelines that should be extremely useful to the administrators in such assignments. The names of Spicer, Foster, Erasmus, Arensberg and Niehoff deserve to be particularly mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> The report entitled, "UNESCO and the Social Consequences of Technological Change", in *International Social Science Bulletin* (now *International Social Science Journal*) [Paris, UNESCO, Vol IV, No. 2, Summer 1952], contains the main conclusions of this Committee.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Mead, *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*, Paris, UNESCO, 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert H. Hyman, Gene N. Levine and Charles R. Wright, *Inducing Social Change in Developing Countries: An International Survey of Expert Advice*, Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, April, 1967.

in this connection.<sup>6</sup> Two such studies by Fraser and Sperling dealing with problems of technical assistance in the Indian context, published recently, are also worth noting here.<sup>7</sup>

What guidelines these studies offer to the administrators of the technical aid programmes? These can only be briefly summarized here.

Of fundamental importance to successful technical assistance is the knowledge of the culture being transformed. An aid expert moving into a new culture to take up his job must at the very outset try and acquire some knowledge of the elements constituting that culture. This is necessary both to enable him to do his job effectively and to avoid doing harm to the local culture through ignorance. He needs to know how the elements of that culture—economic, religious, technological, political, etc., are related to one another and constitute an integrated whole. He must learn something about the social organization and the value system, devoting particular attention to the character of community organization, nature of permissible joint cooperative efforts, the structure of prevailing political and administrative machinery, and the role and importance of the leadership. The expert must know what the existing channels of communication are and how great and of what kind are the influences and pressures that operate there. He should become conversant with local prejudices and modes of thinking, habits, and attitudes, customs and mores, taboos and religious sentiments. This knowledge should help the expert a good deal in anticipating circumstances favourable to the adoption of the innovation and obstacles to be overcome, in foreseeing the likely repercussions of his action, and in choosing a course of action that might lead to greater successes.

Understanding the cultural situation in all its ramifications is a step preliminary to the more important task of adopting an appropriate strategy for stimulating change. All societies, it is now understood, are in a perpetual state of relative tension. In any society, there are present all the time two kinds of forces: one, that favour change, and the other, that resist change. These opposing forces are always

<sup>6</sup> The books by these authors, to be particularly noted, are: Edward H. Spicer, *Human Problems in Technological Change*, New York, 1952; George M. Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change*, New York, 1962; Charles J. Erasmus, *Man Takes Control: Cultural Development and American Aid*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1961; and Conrad M. Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff, *Introducing Social Change: A Manual for Americans Overseas*, Chicago, 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas M. Fraser, Jr. and Anherst, *Culture and Change in India: The Barpali Experiment*, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1968. Jan Bodo Sperling, *The Human Dimension of Technical Assistance: The German Experience at Rourkela, India*, Thaca, 1969.



in conflict with each other, each trying to gain control at the expense of the other. Depending on which force at a particular time is more dominant, the society is relatively slow changing or prone to innovations. The fact that the rate of culture change is never the same in any society implies that the future of these forces is always in a state of flux.

Those involved in technical aid programmes must understand these forces in order to be able to select a suitable *modus operandi* for inducing change. As Foster says, "The most successful guided technological development occurs when program planners and technical specialists are aware of the struggle between the forces for change and the forces for stability found in all cultures. Not only must the presence of the forces be recognized, but in a specific situation they must be identified and related one to another. The strategy of promoting change is then relatively simple—in theory. The strength of the conservative forces must be weakened, or their results neutralized, while simultaneously the change forces must be strengthened."<sup>8</sup>

A knowledge of psychological motivations is fundamental to planned change. The motivations for change often arise from a complex set of needs, desires, interests, obligations, values, and willingness to learn. But motivations alone cannot induce change. To be acceptable, the innovation must fit into the local social, cultural, and ideological value system. People very much resist being forced to change. And, therefore, nothing should ever be done that might give rise to such apprehensions. As far as possible, innovations should be introduced gradually with the fullest possible participation and consent of the people and in ways that are familiar and acceptable to them.

Experience gained in all these years shows that each technical assistance project confronting a highly specific set of local conditions is quite unique. It is, therefore, not possible to lay down guidelines for aid experts except in very general terms. But the knowledge of the local culture should enable the expert to identify the change process that was likely to succeed in that setting and to further it along smoothly.

In a paper presented to the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (1962), one scholar from the Netherlands raised the question whether, as part of the strategy of stimulating technological change, a list could be drawn of character traits conducive

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<sup>8</sup> George M. Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change*, New York, 1962.

to successful life in a technologically advanced country, and whether an honest effort could then be directed towards cultivating these traits in the personality of the peoples of the developing nations. The question was answered in the negative, and for culturally valid reasons. It was felt that such a list of cultural traits would be weighted all in favour of the Western society and the eventual scheme might well turn out to be one of total Westernization. There were many who were not sure that the seemingly desirable character traits in western cultural personality could also usefully be grafted on the peoples of totally different cultures. The consensus that emerged favoured development of these areas on the basis of existing cultural reality and in terms of their specific local problems.

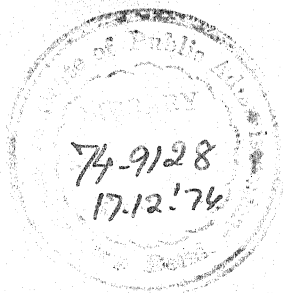
In most of the technical assistance operations, it is usual to attach greater importance to the expert's technical virtuosity rather than his ability in gaining acceptance of the proposed change. The realization is now growing that for an expert, working in developing countries, technical competence in his profession is as important as the task of bringing innovative spirit into that society. His performance must, therefore, be evaluated not in terms of the number of projects inaugurated or completed, but the number of techniques learnt and put to use by his counterparts. A really competent expert must know how best his scientific know-how can be adapted to fit into the local cultural pattern.

Technical experts of various kinds working to 'better the lives' of peoples in the developing countries are professionally competent. Yet, the achievements of certain development programmes seem to be not measuring up to the levels desired. Reasons for this failure are now being better understood. The developmental tasks in the cultural context of these countries cannot be performed efficiently by the unimaginative application of techniques that originally developed in the industrialized nations. The experts clearly need to be introduced to the study of developmental change from a socio-cultural point of view. 'National' experts need to know about the cultural facts no less than 'foreign' ones.

Don Adams narrates an oriental fable to illustrate the plight of a foreign educational adviser who was deficient in his knowledge of the local culture. The story is: "Once upon a time there was a great flood, and involved in this flood were two creatures, a monkey and a fish. The monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and to escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the

swift current. With the very best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable." Continues Don Adams, "The educational adviser, unless he is a careful student of his own culture and the culture in which he works, will be acting much like the monkey; and with the same laudable intentions, he may make decisions equally disastrous . . . ."<sup>9</sup> Surely, the story has a lesson that all those involved in technical assistance administration will do well to learn.

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<sup>9</sup> Don Adams, "The Monkey and the Fish: Cultural Pitfalls of an Educational Adviser", *International Development Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1960).